

ENCOURAGEMENT ENCOURAGEMENT



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‘Candles’

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When we mention candles, many things pop into our heads. Some will come up with birthday candles, others for use in power cuts and yet others may think of church candles... Candles actually play a part in our daily lives. On the second of February we celebrate Candlemas day. This feast, marking the very end of Christmastide is almost forgotten about. It also marks the feast of the Presentation of the Lord who is the light of the world.... A Candle that never goes out.

We take candles for granted and in the last twenty years there has been an upsurge in their uses for decorative and celebratory purposes. They have been lighting the way for many centuries. Religiously, Chanukah, the Jewish Festival of Lights which centres on the lighting of candles dates back to 165 B.C. There are several Biblical references to candles, and the Emperor Constantine is reported to have called for the use of candles during an Easter service in the 4th century. Candles continue to be used too by Christians in a variety of worship. Anglo-Saxon King Alfred the Great (c. 849 - 899) used a candle-clock which burned for 4 hours. There were lines around the side to show the passing of each hour. Later, 24-hour candles were invented based on the same concept. The Sung dynasty in China (960-1279) also used candle-clocks.

Beeswax was introduced to Europe in the Middle Ages but was rarely used in homes because of its great expense. Over the centuries, the development of new waxes for candles has hinged on the availability of the raw material, the ease and economy of processing the raw material into a wax suitable for candle use, and the desirability of the wax in comparison to other available candle waxes.

If you go into most churches, you will find some form of container for holding candles. These themselves are usually very decorative, from simple ones for altar use, to altar stands or huge candelabra for grand tables. In Christian tradition candles are used in many religious events and ceremonies. In fact, there are few religious functions

that at one point, do not use candles from very small ones, to large display items.

From the very start of one's life, in Baptism the role of the candle is great. Many people still have their Baptismal candles which are lit by the Godfather (or parent) and significantly it is lit from the Paschal candle which burns during the Baptism. This remains lit while promises are made to bring up the child as a Christian and as a symbol of the child's or persons belonging to The Light and God himself. The candle is white symbolising purity and sometime embellished with the sign of water for cleansing. Once baptised the child or adult becomes a Priest, Prophet and King and a child of God.

It is not uncommon to use candles also in a confirmation and at very least as gifts to the candidates reminding them of both Baptism and Confirmation. More especially candles are used, especially during first Holy Communion and it is often a beautiful sight seeing children processing up the aisle with white candles, then placed on a stand or on the altar itself, sometimes with the children's names on. These too are treasured possessions... or should be as a reminder of their reception of this wonderful Sacrament and gift.



Candles too adorn the altar in a wedding service and there are many customs which involve candles. In the Orthodox and some Eastern rite churches candles are used and are an important part of the celebration. The candles that are used during the sacrament of the wedding in the Orthodox church symbolize the light of purity of Christ that must be illustrated by the life of the couple. The bride and groom each hold a lit candle during the sacrament to show their willingness to receive Christ, who comes to bless them with His Grace. The candles are a mandatory item for the wedding.

At Mass it is mandatory to have at least two candles lit on the altar. Sometimes there are many for special occasions or to reflect the light of Jesus' presence.

"All the darkness in the world cannot extinguish the light of a single candle." – Saint Francis of Assisi

During Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and especially at those time when it is prolonged many candles surround the Monstrance and are placed on the altar and in many places around it. This can be a beautiful sight and often the light of the candles can be the only lighting form, producing an atmosphere of silence and peace. Many churches have seven-pronged candlestick for this purpose or tall ones placed near the altar.

So too, at the end of life, candles are used to emphasise that the person was a child of God. In times past a candle was lit by the bed side of the person, a practice still maintained in some countries. Similarly, priests called to anoint a person would be led by a lighted candle. Taking Holy Communion to the Sick also retains some of this practice and a candle may be lit at a small table. Reminding the sick person that Jesus is present. Sometimes six candles are placed at the side of the coffin in the church though this is seen less often.

Another practice is to light a candle for a deceased person and a sign of remembrance that, that person, is still 'alive' in the thought of those around them. The act of lighting a candle in memory of someone who has passed is a strong visual symbol of life and spirit. As we watch the flame flicker, we are reminded of the vitality, warmth, and luminescence of the person we have lost, and this can be a comforting thing to do. More importantly we can bring to mind that person and pray for them or for the family. I have a friend, an elderly gentleman who always lit a candle for someone accompanied by prayer which was quite touching and blessed.

There are of course other special sacramental times when candles are lit that enhance ceremonies and prayer. Advent Candles surrounded by greenery remind us that Christmas is coming, and the Light of the world entered our darkness. The three colours used bring and have their own symbolism. In some countries there is the Lucy Festivals of Light (13th December) often accompanied by Advent hymns and readings or Carols. At the end of the Christmastide, we have the blessing of the candles again at Candlemas. Candlemas commemorates the 'Presentation of Christ in the Temple', forty days after His birth. Interestingly this is followed by the blessing of throats on the feast of St. Blaise, the next day, when blessed crossed candles are placed around the throat for healing or protection.

Finally, perhaps the most important use of candles is the presence of the Paschal candle always displayed grandly, as a reminder that Jesus is present among us. It is blessed at the Easter Vigil after Good Friday and is a vibrant sign of the Resurrection. The Wounds of Jesus are marked as is the Alpha and Omega, He, as the beginning and end. These are often magnificently decorated and painted and remain on the altar to be lit again and dated the following year. The candle is blessed and placed into the blessed water as a sign of the Resurrection. At this Mass, little candles are lit from it, lighted from person to person to be held by everyone, and Baptismal promises are renewed, again a wonderful and moving event and sight. These then can be taken home as a reminder and a source of prayer.

So, there is much richness in a little candle. Years of tradition, prayer and symbolism. When next in Church or at home use the little light as a source of prayer. Maybe even at a dinner or family meal light a candle of any colour and pray for all and for peace. Halina Holman ©

Pope Francis

The Mass for the feast of the Presentation of the Lord, also called Candlemas, begins with the blessing of the candles and a procession in a darkened St. Peter's Basilica.....For the feast of Candlemas, Catholics often bring candles to the church to be blessed. They can then light these candles at home during prayer or difficult times as a symbol of Jesus Christ, the Light of the World....
2nd Feb. 2022, Rome

Dear Lord Jesus.... We light this candle to remind us that you are the Light of the world. As we come together now to pray and praise may you remove all darkness from our hearts and minds. Amen

Feast Days in February

1st St. Brigid

2nd Fourth Sunday in Ordinary time

Presentation of the Lord (Candlemas)

3rd St. Blaise 5th St. Agatha

6th Sts. Paul Mikki & Companions

8th St. Jerome Emiliani

9th Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

10th St. Scholastica

11th Our Lady of Lourdes

14th Sts. Cyril, Methodius & Valentine

16th Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

17th The Seven Servite Founders

20th Sts. Jacinta & Francisco

21st St. Peter Damian

22nd The Chair of St. Peter, Apostle

23rd Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

25th St. Tarsisius

27th St. Gabriel 28th St. Oswald

